University of Alberta

Inventing the Lifeboat

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
English

Department of *English and Film Studies*

Edmonton, Alberta
Spring, 2007

Library and Archives Canada

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Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
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395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
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Your file Votre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-29892-3
Our file Notre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-29892-3

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Dedication

for Marsha

Abstract

This thesis is a collection of poems that explore a variety of subjects, including work, music, travel, art and dreams. The diverse nature of the themes and subjects that the poems consider is held together by a particular kind of poetic attention that seeks out the moments of epiphany hidden within the quotidian and the process of creation. The poems are focused on the confluence of the personal, the historical, and the mythical within the everyday details of language and the physical world.

Acknowledgements

A special thanks to Bert Almon for his supervision and guidance in assembling this collection. It has been a privilege to work with him.

I also owe many thanks to Olga Costopoulos, Lisa Martin-DeMoor, Shannon Romanyshyn, Kirk Miles, and my fellow classmates from the U of A's graduate poetry seminar. These poems have all benefited from the attention and advice they offered so generously.

A final thanks to my friends and family for supporting me in this project, and especially to Marsha Quartero, who listened to the ideas before they found the page.

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I – Sisyphus for Hire

Young Rembrandt's Copy Editor

Next to Jan Lievens painting his father
posed as St. Paul writing to the Thessalonians,
Rembrandt is learning to etch
in the dim light of his studio. His needle scrapes,
eats into the waxen soot covering the polished copper plate,
still clumsy with the crosshatching. Later
he will pour ink into the exposed grooves
and transfer a mirror image onto damp paper.

He cuts, removes, to reveal a small portrait of himself
with a wide nose and anxious stare.

Here, under the inescapable brightness
of the library lights, I too am paring,
but at words, not soot.
The words belong to a man who has spent ten years
chasing Rembrandt through the streets of Leiden,
collecting every article that belonged to him, down
to the receipts from his students.
I slice at his words carefully, hired to help
craft this portrait of Rembrandt who, in the fading
light of his studio, is discovering how to create
by taking away.

Slabsaw

The machine mauling, hacking out a driveway;
earplugs can't mute its voice:
of rusted cigarettes, a blue-faced tantrum.

Darren has danced this ice-cream cart–
a sullen partner who demands the lead–
for sixteen years, his zamboni flooding slurry
on the cratered cement, now ready
for a squelching shinny, but Andy follows
the thick trail with his vacuum.

Lunchbreak show: Dan strains to lift the wallsaw
over his head, lets it thud onto the lawn.

Driving back to the shop, under finger clouds
darkening in a clasp,

I find Tony asleep in his chair, his office
decorated with moldy coffee-maker,
last week's newspapers, oil-stained
phonebooks, and a desk-drawer full of butts.

The slabsaw shriek still echoes in my ears.

Another truck retires in the bay; I hose it down,
sweep the new pond
into the gutter-grate, surrounded by the silence
of caged blades.

Hardhats on the Dashboard

All...wears man's smudge and shares man's smell
–Gerard Manley Hopkins

We are listening to mouthfuls of rain
burst against the dust-stained hood.
Our clothes splotched by the sudden storm,
we shelter in the cab of the truck, red
seats and floor caked with concrete slurry.

The slabsaw—dead again.
A mangled blade, defeated engine?
We wait for the mechanic to turn up
and resurrect the rolling Cyclops,
while a single lane of traffic inches
past the deserted saw, a funeral procession:
Friday's escaping cars forced into mourning
by our lifeless machine.

You survey the state of your boots;
I close my eyes to hear the plunk and splat
of rain attacking the truck.

Concrete Dentistry

Staring into the clamped mouth, torch in my right hand, a tooth in my left, I'm arranging a smile for the coringsaw bit. Flames dissolve the paste holding the teeth in place: it's ready, again, to gash through cement and spit up slurry. The next day, watching steel peek through a basement ceiling, I wait for the cylindrical slug to drop. The mouth chews a perfect hole with its dentures, and the core smashes against the concrete, scattering like chalk. Through the new gap I see Tony's gnarled grin, "Watch your head!"

Plastic Head, Steel Toes

Sweep the stairwell every day; expel
the stubborn clods of dried slurry that cling
to crusted boots, debris severed from
leather with each trudge up the steps.

After washing down the shop floor, witness
the swirling dust regroup in the parking lot,
ready to slip back in with the ceaseless wind
that batters the building, carrying with it
a herd of tired feet stained
with the labour of toiling against earth.

Hardhats now sleep on top of lockers;
empty boots flop exhausted on the floor.

Concrete Therapy

A jammed blade, a cancelled job, it doesn't take much:
he fills his hardhat with fury and hurls it against his truck.
The other concrete cutters laugh at Darren's rage;
he does this every day. Jake, the filthy guard dog, only
growls in his sleep, and Dave, the one-eyed dispatch boss,
disappears into his office. Jerry, a new mechanic, watches
this helmet of Hephaestus skitter across the cement
shop floor before resuming his story to me: how his wife
slept with his best friend, how he drove his truck
into his best friend's house, how he
left his kids and came West to look for work.

Sisyphus for Hire

No trickster, deceiver of the gods,
but I, too, labour up a small steep hill.

Pushing a wheelbarrow spilling over
with jack-hammered bricks and concrete,
I drudge along the ply-board path
laid in the mud up the sharp climb.

Dump the barrow. Fill with gravel. Ease back down the hill.

A day's endless plodding for a backyard basketball court:
birthday surprise from some man's wife.

I eat my lunch in the shade of the weeping birch.
The other men talk of their weekend,
and I think of what Camus said:

When Sisyphus pauses before walking
down to his boulder, he is finally conscious:
he is stronger than his stone.

Back to work, but my rock
remains as heavy
going down
as up.

Cleaning the Eavestroughs with Daedalus

rung by wooden rung, he and I climb into the air and alight on the
gravel roof, listening to the crunch of our steps

a wary squat, then inch to the edge, scrape from the gutter shards of
leaves, pine needles, pebbles, and mystifying dirt

afterwards, with aching knees I behold the shrunken earth: the yard
a frothing green sea; above, a seething Phoebus

I'm free–neighbours and streets now beneath my reign, but still safe
from the sun, delighting in my father's middle course

Ornithology Section

after wind rush from the door sneaks in
crushed leaves, flustered wings

after confused flitting against the stuffed
wall of Fiction

after inquiring pecks at
foot-eaten carpet

after the pulse that beckons us
to circle and watch–

a bird leaves the bookstore and we are
disappointed with

the stillness, left only a name:
Sparrow, we decide

Stone Creek Gardens

Outside the greenhouse, air is untethered, frivolous;
inside, it is heft, resistance, a wet cloth
across my face that I carry with each hug
of tomato plants, hauling the pungent flock
into the trailer, stained by scent.

Humming dome of the tropics, displaced
beneath the sighs of frigid mountains:
you and I work in this heaving lung
surrounded by trailing petunias, gazanias,
nasturtiums, and pineapple mint.

A swallow built its nest in a hanging basket
filled with begonias, invading this controlled
nature with a disorder the glass walls could not hold out.
Unwilling to disentangle its house,
you made a sign, Not for Sale,
and left the basket where you found it, a small
gesture of equilibrium.

II – Tacet for Paperclip Musician

Slide

1.

My trombone's voice is peanut butter and bourbon in the morning;
a metallurgist's ache to hide a lisp;
a nail in the foot when provoked;
a bricklayer of jazz, sloppy kiss goodnight;
a ballroom dancer lagging behind his partner's steps;
a child writing in a second language, sending hate mail to saxophones.

2.

Purchased from a cousin
who locked it in a closet,
trombone waited
to speak new words,
and once it regained a voice
spent years arguing with conductors,
elbowing for room in its section
and sneering at other instruments
before finally grunting into its place:
the proletariat of jazz,
planning eventual coups
and celebrations of melodic uprising.

3.

The Trombone is the middle child of the brass family,
resembling the labours of the older brothers
Tuba and Euphonium. Naturally,
Trombone is resentful of the attention
given to the baby of the family,
the precocious Trumpet.

4.

My trombone is mute when Bill Watrous' speaks the foreign language of chords. (A rare talent that requires the trombonist to play the root note of a chord, hum the fifth simultaneously, which makes the third appear from nowhere.) Bill's trombone talks a sober punch, fools the blind that a trio is present. His trombone's voice is a polished white shoe that glides over a varnished dance floor while the other instruments gawk from the bar.

The Musician's Breath

Trombones beside us, we lie
on the classroom floor, shut our eyes.
The instructor tells us we must
master how to breathe
before we can play:

With one hand, measure shallow
chest-raising breaths
that fail the instrument.
Now, hand on stomach, practice
Buddha-belly breaths–
feel the cave of wind expand under fingers.

Next, sitting in strict posture:
still no instruments, but breathing
as musicians. He tells us the inhalation
before the first note is "like swallowing
an egg in one gulp."

Mouth drops to oblong
and a swift draw
reaches the bottom of my lungs.

Ready to push
my air into trombone, I count
one, two, three, egg.

Paperclip Musicians

"I wish now that I had made Roman a doctor rather than a trombonist, but it's too late." –Carol Shields, *Unless*

Heresy in any trombone section is the violation of allegiance.
My dissension: I always wanted to play the trumpet.

*

Play too long, and your lips will buzz,
absorbing brass vibrations. Words that cross
the mouth get soaked and lazy. Laugh too hard,
vibrations spread over your whole face.

*

Bill Watrous told us to use Pond's cold cream
to lubricate the slide. Five young men, in awe
of Bill's doodle-tonguing, made drugstore visits
to bring home make-up remover, applying it
behind locked bedroom doors, hoping this was
the only secret to assuming the instrument's voice.

*

We learned in Elementary French that a paperclip
is called a small trombone. My classmates were thrilled
that a language named objects as we dreamt them.
We drove our teacher mad playing jazz
on our *petit trombones*.

First Note

After months of being muted in its case
the stubborn trombone is slow to forgive:

the first note after separation, a grudging
kiss between ex-lovers

Stuttering wheezes dribble from the bell
and lips tire quickly, stinging from effort:

the music an empty grasp in a dark room
bitter deadlock instead of dance

*

Hume, the happy skeptic, believed that
even though the sunlight touched him today
it might not tomorrow. Fingers drop book,
book knocks against table, but our reason denies
a force connecting the events.

No matter how many notes the brass proclaims,
I'm always in doubt, instrument at attention,
if anything will come out this time.
A jangle in the lips, tone singing to the air,
but between the two
a mystery.

Spit Valve: Trombone Talks Back

My trombone's voice is peanut butter and bourbon in the morning

Please, don't mistake my slur
for drunkenness. I gave that up
years ago. It's true: glissando,
elision, slide, I refuse any tongue
to break my notes apart, I refuse.

In jazz band, I'm a shy but reliable
accountant; in the orchestra: the ugly
cousin that violins ignore after practice.

I caught you staring at my mouth,
wondering where the black tunnel leads,
and how does the music see to get out?

But you, David, with your stumbling
lips and feeble tongue,
your careless fingers shoving my arm
like a police officer, you'll never
hear the triple-voiced birds' choir
that Bill Watrous can coax
from trombone lungs, never
deftly stone-skip over streams
of notes, never
meet me as an equal
beneath the shadow of Orpheus.

Your lips burn and sting because I want them to.

I would rather wait in silence, caged
in my case hugging cheap red felt,
than squawk and burp in disgrace
fueled by your amateur breath.

Three Translations

The band leader explains a jazz shuffle
by repeating the phrase "chew tobacca."
He claps hard on the *ba*, showing the back beat:
chew to*ba*cca
chew to*ba*cca
"If all the parts string together right, the band
will be *in the pocket*," and he cups
his hands together: the angles of music in meeting.
I can still spot a shuffle tune after one measure,
the smell of tobacco on a drummer's breath.

*

Robin, hunched over his guitar, defines the rhythm
of country music as a heavy *chunk*, to seem
like more players than you are. "Johnny Cash
and the Tennessee Two didn't have a drummer,
but it sounded like they did." Chunk:
when notes are trapped in the hands,
but the strings chomp like a train.

*

Playing behind the bridge of the mandolin
with a guitar-slide, I creep to the strings' anchor,
avoid sudden changes, gnawing, climb
imperceptibly. Connor (on accordion)
says I'm grinding chalk into his eyes,
but I think of it as winding a clock,
goading the gears until they snap.

Tonguing

Caught on the balcony between waking and sleep;
wind nattering against my neck, and the sun,
whose splayed fingers should rest in my hair,
is eclipsed by the opposing apartment building.

Spluttering motor of a car idling in the alley,
but my ears hear a roomful of tongues
practicing musical enunciation–
tuk-e-ta tuketa tuketa tuketa
dig-a-da digada digada
Sun nudges aside the obtuse tower, and resumes
its monologue undisturbed. My tongue grows
sharp as it listens to memory:

But when I pulled the trombone to my lips,
tongue, ready to peck apart music,
lost its courage, and I babbled
into an unimpressed mouthpiece.

A gaggle of clouds interrupts the light this time;
the sun's hand is removed, its speech drowned out,
my poised tongue turned slack in the shade.

Tacet

a concert hall stage littered with used notes
first plucked from strings, given life
upsetting the air like bees
drunk as they slip from ear to ear
repeating their names as proud children
        until
they fall, exhausted,
breathless against the wooden stage,
covered over by other spent music,
waiting in silence until they are swept up
        collected
in a waste-bin by the night janitor
and scattered in the alley: a diaspora
of second-hand notes drifting unheard,
some finding homes in women's tangled hair
others hugging a chain-link fence
        or else
huddled at the trunks of trees
pleading to be given a second chance with
a new instrument–maybe this time a cello

Spying in the Choir Loft

(Inspired by the *Forty-Part Motet*, an art installation by Janet Cardiff, in which the forty voices of *Spem In Alium*, by Thomas Tallis, are split over forty audio speakers, one voice per speaker.)

Eyes open, sitting
Alone in the middle of a horseshoe colonnade,
I orient my ears to the blast of sound waves
from a verisimilitude performance.

Eyes closed, sitting
A choir is born: voices wrought into faces.
I'm the lone adjudicator in Royal Albert Hall,
as notes are handed from the third balcony
back to ears by compliant molecule ushers.

Eyes closed, walking
Now I'm creeping between the rows of singers,
each voice a warm hand on my neck,
hearing the stunted breath of the first tenor
as he waits for his cue; the hidden glance
from the baritone at the lead soprano (a crush
for three years) has to pass through me first;
I could slink between the second and third tenor
to join in their parts, and duck out before
anyone notices the change in harmonic balance;
I tug at the choir director's sleeve and whisper in his ear
make this one extra special tonight:
it's a birthday present for the queen.

Dies Irae

A regiment of violin bows pierces the air
instruments fill with Mozart's *Requiem*.
Bow-tips cut and jut into the fury
of immortal judgment; an army of voices
prays to be saved when accursed souls
are thrown to bitter flames.

While I sit in a concert hall
breathing music, miles away five men
spill into your emergency room, each
stabbed and bleeding after Ares crashed
their Friday night bacchanal. One man,
his jugular punctured by a small blade, holds
his neck and leaves a thick trail
of blood behind his steps.

Finally, my love, you finish stitching their wounds.
Clothes stained with strangers' blood,
you now sit patiently with a one-hundred-year-old
woman who, a mute Sibyl,
refuses to answer questions about her pneumonia.

The man stabbed in the jugular was flown
to another hospital, but you won't know
if he lived through the night or traveled down
to join the legion of lifeless shades
who mass before the Stygian river.

III – Mackem Accents

Attacking the Black Canvas

The group of tracksuit-clad *charvers*
flees from the alley as the sinister
popping-popcorn sound of fireworks
spills into the street. Since I've arrived
there have been daily rehearsals
for Guy Fawkes Night–
two months of unofficial preparation
that unsettles the air
awaiting its November catharsis.

*

I ask for the history and I'm told, "we
celebrate the capture of a man
who tried to blow up parliament
by lighting the night sky on fire."

The black window gave back our faces
drawn upon with tendrils and sparks
from a sky stung and singed.
I saw from my room, overlooking
a shattered phone booth and the brick
bomb-shelter bus stop, only one effigy
of the Old Guy, unlit,
yet dragged like a tattered Hector
behind the heels of a train of children.

Morning: celebrations exhausted, the brittle
air still on alert, distrusting
the quiet that seeps from every alley.

Sunderland Collage

Photograph: Seaburn

A self-held portrait subjected to my estimation
in framing face, empty coast
abandoned to autumn, North Sea paused
with teeth bared, waiting to gnash
at the hardened beach, and lighthouse,
a distant spike on a curling tail of land
provoking the water.
The picture proves I'm an ill-timed tourist
in windbreaker and toque,
arriving for a party the day after,
thick slur of wind suggesting I leave.

Museum and Winter Gardens

The thick slur of wind suggesting he leave
was ignored by George Blackie Sticks
as he painted his *Marsden Rock*
a few miles north of Seaburn, his landscape
showing the same leering cliffline, and a man
below on the shore, garrisoned by rocks
against a taunting North Sea.
The man holds a rope tied to something hidden,
bracing himself, alone in the coming storm.
His gallery neighbour: Ralph Hedley's
Willie Wouldhave Inventing the Lifeboat.

Quayside, St. Peter's

Willie would have invented the lifeboat,
but his rival, Lionel Lukin, beat him by
three years. In the heavy fog, a fisherman
dressed in bright orange is a beacon
as he tends his slack lines. Remembering him
at his wire, which disappears in the water
next to two boats clunking
together, I realize Marsha is right:
Sticks' lone man is fishing, hauling in his net
at low tide, and not in danger of drowning:
his portrait subjected to my imagination.

The Museum Vaults

in this bar, their eyes are the glass shards
that crown Sunderland's brick walls
to keep the neighbourhood kids out

we slouch to a booth, a new acquisition
for the Vaults' collection of drinkers:
souvenirs from the city's coal mining history

blue smoke strangles the room, molds
faces, and takes impressions of breath

pint in hand, statues are finally roused
by the last-call bell, cajoled into a stinging night
where sulking, North Sea air brings us out of storage

*

morning, and I'm crossing the Monkwearmouth
bridge, watching a single boat yaw in the river

along the quay, wind is berating the Saxon
stones of St Peter's church

inside, empty pews, smells of trapped breath,
and a display of a palm-full of coloured fragments:

the oldest stained glass in England
crafted by visitors from Gaul who were asked to leave

Tyne and Wear Metro

A sign announces the names and addresses of passengers
caught evading fare and the fines they received.

The last train to Sunderland is filled with weekend
tourists who spent the day at Marsden Rock.

Tynemouth, Wallsend, Hadrian Road

A ticket inspector lurches from beam to beam,
the puncher strapped and banging against his hip.

Tonight, the river Tyne is a dappled mirror
returning the bowed lights of the Millennium Bridge.

Manors, Gateshead, Brockley Whins

Our feet propped on the rear window, we're traveling
backwards into the night, watching each station pull away.

Marsden Rock, an angry fist, is left in the mob of North Sea
waves, judged by the cliffs that stare back.

Fellgate, Seaburn, St. Peter's

Drunken teenagers spill out on the platform at the Stadium of Light.
The street lamps of East Bolden light the way for no one.

Long Meg and Her Daughters

On foot in Cumbria, Lake District–
that unwild wilderness has left us
alone on the hillside beyond Penrith,
claimed by the mother stone
and her circling children, who
change us, even if we do not know it.

For this is not a roped-off Stonehenge,
and like Wordsworth who suffered
the weight of awe next to the
family forlorn of red sandstone,
we trace spiraling symbols
carved on the face of twelve-foot-tall
Meg, whose legend, hardly sensing it,

we already believe. Her coven of witches,
punished and frozen by a saint, threaten
with storms anyone who would
move them, but Caleb
stood and posed on one,
waving us on, answering our own waves.

At dusk, the pasture frowns and stones
sneer. Remember, the stories tell that if
Long Meg were damaged
she would bleed. We're moving
past what we can't explain, yet with eyes
on the fermenting clouds, taking with us
the feel of wind on our faces.

Empires of Northumberland

Hadrian's Wall

Our guide believes in the eternal Roman dotted line
that rules the map, but the laughter from a local man
means we're lost: the stone monument of excluding
the Caledonians is gone, harvested like the lead and iron
of the Colosseum, and what is left of the ruins is miles away.

Overlooking the pasture where Pictish tribes attacked
the occupiers of Britannia province,
we convince ourselves we'll return
to find and perch on what remains of the Wall.

The Royalty

In the alley behind the Royalty Pub, four *charvers*
stand in a huddle, cigarette stub passed between
them. Tracksuited, wearing counterfeit Burberry tartan
caps, they spit onto the brick wall, strategizing.

The American student is the last one to leave the bar
when they ask for a lighter,
then hit him on the head with a glass bottle.

They scatter into night, their Mackem accents
ascending to the curtained windows of Chester Road.

St. John of Beverly

Back towards the bus-stop at Hexam, we discover
Anick, hidden village in the sheep-mottled hills,
and its small church, named for the saint who pulled
a *Yes* from the mute tongue of a boy and interceded
for Henry V at Agincourt, his spirit blessing
the war against the French.

We stare from the threshold: something deters
our instinct to inspect the empty church,
and we leave the coloured reflection of St. John
undisturbed: a stained-glass light dividing
the blackness, touching the slender pews.

Edward Carpenter Exfoliates

"[Carpenter] is not likely to have much earthly immortality... He will not figure in history." –E.M. Forster

Safe from the steel breath of Sheffield's winter,
crowded in the hall between the grey, hopeful
faces of the League, your voice joins in with
the hymn "The Hallowing of Labour."

A priest who would not serve, you replaced
your faith with the religion of socialism
to try to bring salvation to England.

*

With your hands you crafted a beautiful
and ridiculous theory–fingers kneading
a clay mound of Marx, Emerson, Whitman,
and your brief guru, the Gñani Ramaswamy.

The desire in one person will evolve into
a social revolution: you stretched Lamarck's
zoology to create a fragile metaphysic.

And what would Lamarck have said to this sculptured
idea in his likeness? Would he cry different
tears from those Napoleon pulled from his eyes?

Exfoliare–to strip of leaves: you believed the world
would shed its outer shell, revealing the new seed
of a better life.

Your idealism was a stone gripped
tightly in the rough folds of your hand.

*

But at the funeral, even friends knew,
as you discarded the husk of the body,
that you would be ground up by the
Freudian and Fabian mills of history.

IV – Self-held Portrait: The Ill-timed Tourist

Ice Caves: Canyon Creek, Kananaskis

From the gravel road, we see the opening,
a small black bruise on the mountain,
and scamble up the trail, which disappears
into a tangle of rubble and scrub.
We ascend, and our presence
scumbles the bruise, spread to a ragged mouth.

Into the cave and its winter breath, our lungs
now damp socks, ice clinging to walls and floor.

Fifty yards in, the tunnel
shrinks,
and we slide,
lying flat, staring
at limestone ceiling.

With rising panic
at the stone
squeezing my chest
and back,
in the quiet blackness
we realize
we're stuck:
the path drained
into mountain's gut.

No other side to emerge at,
drunk on daylight—
only blindness and silence

and rock, turning around,
to grope our way back.

Night Gardening

Night at times revives a curious plant whose light makes powerfully furnished rooms fall apart into clumps of shadows.
–Francis Ponge, "The Candle"

In bed at the Lazy Dee Motel, Gull Lake, Saskatchewan, and a different kind of plant flashes to life across the prairie sky. Illuminated, its rigid stalk and precocious branches reach to touch the soil, like Dante's Tree of Grace stretching from the empyrean growing upside down. When it disappears, we concentrate on the freight train grunting as it passes. Alive again, the plant snatches the room from shadows with a spit of light, throwing against the far wall a silhouette of our bodies slumped together on a sagging mattress before withering back into the clouds. We sleep, and a season's worth of plants will grow and wilt against the sky—that strange mirror of black earth that cultivates and harvests its vegetation in one moment.

Literary Pub Crawl

In the White Horse Tavern, New York's oldest bar, a plaque marks the booth where Dylan Thomas spent his nights–including his last. The coal-coloured wood on the floor and walls hasn't changed, but the tourists are new. We circle around our guide, a struggling actor, who declaims poems for us. But our portrait of the artist is hardly nostalgic: he would often relieve himself at his table rather than make the effort to find the toilet, and he spent his last night raging in a gutter. The tour continues and we sit in Steinbeck's corner at Chumley's, see where cummings ranted at Minetta's, photograph the house where Hart Crane lived before he gave his body to the sharks, and pose under the sign at the Kettle of Fish, where Kerouac was once nearly beaten to death. We finish the tour back at the Horse, drinking the rest of the night believing we are surrounded by the ghosts of writers who are unmoved as we intrude on their past, their words drowned out by our gabble inside the crowded bar.

Buanderie

Montpellier's hostel is overflowing with spring
travelers. The concierge is explaining in French,
throwing cadences of her rippling
voice over her shoulder at me.

I follow, collecting fragments of sound in the dim
hallway. She stops at a room with white sheets
hanging from a wire, a sail blooming, and her hands
part the air in two; a *whoosh*
from her lips means it will all be gone soon.

An open window delivers the elated squall
of children playing outside. Shrill voices of
their game require no translation.

When I return: scattered mattresses and snoring;
I tuck my backpack close and eavesdrop
on the wind and trees arguing like old men into the night.

Cemetery Visiting-Hours

By god, I'd rather slave on earth for another man–
some dirt-poor tenant farmer who scrapes to keep alive–
than rule down here over all the breathless dead.
–Achilles

Gull Lake, Saskatchewan

Grandmother points out the extended relatives
who all purchased one-way tickets from Norway
to coax stubborn crops from this clenched ground.
Afraid of walking on graves–no concrete outline
to know where the coffin ends–I balance between
headstones: careful not to offend with my footsteps
or linger too long on names I cannot read.

Bergen, Alberta

To send evidence to a friend in Bergen, Norway,
a picture to prove his city's wandering second cousin
finally found a home. The sign calls the hamlet *paradise*:
a gas station and gang of houses crouched
behind the windbreak line of a farmer's stubbled field.
Driving back, my friends decide to inspect the graveyard
outside a locked Anglican church, but I stand watch at the gate,
waiting to be chastised as sightseers of the dead.

Père La Chaise, Paris

Here, we are all tourists, Odysseuses with cameras,
exploring opulent estates of the deceased, clutching
guidebooks to hunt for favourite shades, and posing
with their obliging markers. Next, we take in the exposed
bones of the Catacombs: but no photograph needed
as keepsake for the miles of *Vanitas* images,
and no Tiresias to name the countless peasants,
their skulls stacked chin to forehead.

Sunday in the Jardines del Real

Valencia

1.

on the bench across from me, an old man is filing his wife's
fingernails while she watches children stream past her

2.

shouts from a football match, guarded by the medieval Torres
de Serranos, cut into the chatter of families ogling flamingoes

3.

a homeless man, leaning against a stone archway, grins
as he combs his black puppy with a toothbrush

Photograph: Plaza Real, Barcelona

My sleep-stained gaze from
the balcony of the Kabul hostel
brings the plaza to life.

Over the orchestrated clatter of café chairs
scraping against stone, boys kicking a football,
sullen waiters smoking, tourists gawking,
window shutters slamming, and scattered
milling feet–
        a bird's squawk punctures the tableaux
like a falsetto exclamation from Bob Wills
over the western swing of his Texas Playboys.

I abandon my lookout, impatient
to assume the morning's fray.

*

The photograph in my hand
is Plaza Real's frantic day
stretched mockingly
into an endless breath: a waiter's
cigarette forever lit, a stranger's mute
word un-launched from her tongue.

But the paper scene is not a moment's
elegy: I hold a harsh squawk
that revives an etherized
memory and the unconscious square.

Submersion

Pompeii drowned
and spent sixteen-hundred years under Vesuvian ash
before coming up for breath.
Pliny the Younger, dutifully reading Livy
in his yard, saw the suffocating cloud
grow like a pine tree, spreading its shadowed
branches across the daylight.

The city was sealed shut in the earth's memory–
an artifact of ancient grandeur and the quiet quotidian.

*

A piercing sun stares at us as we walk
the restored streets, peeking into
houses, shops, and public baths
that the volcano destroyed and preserved.
We marvel at graffiti under glass–
a caricature of Caesar scratched into an erotic
painting on the wall of the Lupanare.

Most surprising: the plaster casts of dying
Pompeians, some caught in horror
as their air is displaced by dust and ash,
others sleeping contentedly, lying in bed with a lover,
dreaming while they drown.

Playa Manzanillo, Costa Rica

Black sea, black sky, split
by a string of distant boats–
illuminated sunflower seeds.
Toes clutch night-cooled sand,
grounding a gaze at
keyhole stars.
Sea waves a blanket
tucked and untucked.
Echo of sambas along the beach,
music peeled apart until bare:
a single snare drum
carries the distance.

Carrying the distance,
a single snare drum, its
music peeled apart until a bare
echo sambas along the beach,
tucked and untucked.
Sea waves a blanket of
keyhole stars
swallowing a gaze; no
toes clutch night-cooled sand.
Illuminated sunflower seeds
a string of distant boats–
black sea, black sky, split.

IV – Imagined Shape Cupped in Your Hands

Photograph: Oven in a Field

Above our oven, that mouth-brooding
fiery maternal cave–
a *memento mori* hangs
whispering to the appliance.
Its captured scene: a second cousin
squatting beside fallow field
being frisked by the balsam poplar's
arthritic hands, sinking heels into alien
soil. Wind shoves against the stubborn
metal, rain powerless to dissolve it
like silt. The abandoned
oven scowls from the scrub,
resenting its new neighbours.
But rusted lips open enough to let slip
an advertisement to birds beyond
the frame: apartment
for rent, great view.

Rembrandt's *Aristotle Contemplating a Bust of Homer*

"Contemplation is at once the highest form of activity…and the most continuous."
–Aristotle

A slant of light reflects off the sculptured
head of the blind seer, Aristotle's hand
resting on his stone hair. The same light
breathes on the philosopher's face, his eyes–
so much fretting about his eyes, whether looking
to the bust or beyond. His other hand, posed
naturally to touch his chain, a gift from Alexander,
or is it the Golden Chain of Homer,
a symbol of divine connection?

Rembrandt painted Aristotle's face from a sculpture
he owned, and perhaps he gazed at it the way
his figure considers Homer.
Presented to Don Antonio Ruffo, the painting may
have flattered the collector by comparing him
to a philosopher, or exposed the irony of
contemplation's limits set beside the blind man
to whom the gods whispered their secrets.

Deeply in debt, does Rembrandt favour the poor poet,
or the ornately dressed, patroned thinker?

While sitting in the murmur of New York's Metropolitan,
I imagine him staring at his Aristotle,
who broods on Homer,
all three towering over us,
their descendants.

The Glass Blowers

Sand, sauce-bottle, hourglass–we melt them into one thing:
that old Egyptian syrup, that tightens as we teach it to sing.
– Les Murray

Four furnaces, hissing, smother your voice
beneath the aquarium skylights.
While you retrieve your project, I study
the blowers bent like bakers, provoking
their bricked-in suns to lick shape on glass.

One is breathing into the bubble
balanced on the rod tip
while spinning the iron tube in his hands
at a precise pace. The blower
finally cracks off the orb
as you return tucking a failed
assignment under your arm–another lopsided
bowl for your bookshelf. Outside the studio,

under molded clouds, my ears still ring
from the fire's laboured voice. I lean
over my book and stare into the light
captured by words.
You're explaining tomorrow's new experiment,
the imagined shape cupped in your hands.

Hamlet in the Park

Wee, sleekit, cow'rin, tim'rous beastie

Under the sharp blaze of afternoon sun,
Marcellus and Bernardo hold the midnight
watch; magpies squeal like car horns,
punctuating a rambling Polonius; the roar
of an airplane condemns the Ghost
to a dumb show. Far off, a boy screams
in delight, chasing dragonflies
with his father, as Claudius entreats
his sulking stepson to stay in Elsinore.

While Hamlet weighs the value of his last
breath, a squirrel steals the audience's gaze,
flitting between strange hands in a frenzied
search for food. Grinning, we watch it miss
the pumpkin seed you threw, but reject
another's popcorn kernel with contempt.

The squirrel exits stage-left, his plans
a-gley, and again eyes follow Hamlet
bemoaning his coward's conscience.

Tower of Gaudí

"I think the anarchists showed bad taste in not blowing up [his cathedral] when they had the chance." –George Orwell

Necks lurching back ninety degrees, tourists
gape at La Sagrada Familia's summits, and
questions of etymology drop into open
mouths. Did Gaudí give us gaudy?

No answer. With shielded eyes we trace the
mountainous spindles, spires that could
serve the giants in a second attack against
the kingdom of the sky. Think not gaudy,

but *gaudir, gaudere*,
to be merry, delight in, and rejoice:
banishing right angles like Plato banished poets,
crafting Gothic ocean waves that break over stiff
battalion lines of apartments, façades mottled
into a quarry with balconies that bend at the hip,
slithering park benches gleaming in their attire
of shattered mosaic tiles. Gaudí still stalks
the Barcelona streets, whispering dirty jokes
into the ear of the city's architecture.

•

Antonio is gazing at his masterpiece, astonied
by his audaciousness, dreaming about the peaks
that will claim ownership of the clouds;
he steps back to focus his reverie; his ears refuse
the cowbell clang of the shambling streetcar:
nothing can disrupt his pure vision.

Leveled in the street, as the babel pitches
around him, he fixes his stare to the imagined
teeth of his basilica, which are swallowed
in the sky's black mouth with his last breath.

VI – Sleeping at the Edge of the Roof

Thanksgiving

Just put a wineglass and some wine in front of me;
Words will fall out of my mouth like apple blossoms.
– Ghalib

The fence sags between your yard and the park.
We drift, feet sinking in webs of leaves and moss.

The prairie wears highway suspenders stretched taut.
Today the sky is weeping: a breakthrough in therapy.

Peek between the deadfall down the hill: see, the house
is red. Trees are crooked statues snickering at my back.

Music in this bar arm-wrestles your tongue. Sweeping
up: cigarette butts, pre-dawn blackness, but no petals.

A stone frog spits into the muddy pond. One goldfish
is dead; the other swims like it was always this way.

Liquid Dialectics

Morning Percolation

Coffee beans are worker bees:
industrious and stoically indignant;
        a mule kick to the gut
        shaped like a shriveled heart.
They rest in the palm divided,
a fierce antinomy.

The vain conspiracy in the grinder
is pried apart by a nihilistic filter.
I drink morning's tempered fuel
and discard Dionysian ash residue.

At The Ship & Anchor Pub

My pint of Guinness is a baritone choir
caught rehearsing in your grandmother's basement;
        it weights the hand
        with the sound of completed labour
as waves settle on the beach
of the lip of the glass.

After too many low tides
I'm an overflowing silent fisherman
dropping leaden cream down my well
while Apollo pouts outside the window.

Mango Stone

Not knowing how the fruit works
we split it in two, pry the halves apart
and break into the flesh.

The hard shell covered with fruit fibers–
we slurp at the disc, juices
trailing down our wrists.

Open the stone and discover what the
clamped hand hides: first, a lining of brittle
paper, mottled, crumpling as I hold it to the light,

then a kidney-shaped casing, which I remove to find
the seed, the heart. A textured pebble now unwrapped,
it sits on your shelf next to the anatomy textbooks.

Weeks later, frail and finished, it cracks
and opens in my palm. Inside, dull, speckled
flecks reflecting each other with imperfect symmetry.

Citrus Paradisi

in the sweet smelling house of the rind,
the proportions, arcane and acerb.
–Pablo Neruda, "Ode to a Lemon"

granny smith apples
nectarines out of season
small plums before they're ripe–
lemons, only occasionally

but always grapefruits:

the yellow fist or ruby globe
under supermarket scrutiny
questioned and weighed in the hand

start mornings with a tender
dissection
the knife, a curved
serrated blade, cuts membranes
and evicts sour tenants

fierce wedges of tart flesh
are punctured by coffee,
the tongue is becoming confused

squeeze the remaining juice
into a bowl for guzzling:

leave a spent rind boat with seeds
beached on the rim of the plate

Frigorifico

Your Spanish roommate taught it to you.
Now after the concert, between antique
cheers and the drone of applause,
you release your new word–your tongue,
licking the fresh tone, savours the *or*,
accelerates through the *if*
lets it spin once and throws
from your teeth like a discus–
figorifico!
A *bravo* or an *encore* that you pitch
to the performers? But you finally
told me what it meant:
refrigerator.

•

Your roommate's mouth refuses
to pronounce a *ch*. Instead, he tells
you he is making *shicken* in the *kishen*.

His favourite words in English:
washing machine.
He repeats them to himself as he walks
through the apartment, sliding on
every *shh* and *chh*–
washing machine washing machine.
He smiles as the sound bubbles in his head
and the words form suds on his lips.

Honky-Tonk Philosophy

Last time I heard Hank Williams sing "Your Cheatin' Heart" I was stuck in a farmer's field west of Brooks, my truck's tires spinning frantically in the damp soft earth. It was two mistakes–both Hank and the drive. After the heavy rain the day before, I should have known to stay off the back roads, and Hank is never good comfort after a failed relationship. As I hear that song again, I think about the idea you once told me, that my mind is only a collection of ever-changing perceptions: the *me* stalled in the truck is not the same *me* listening to the radio now. But something unmoved has carried through my infinite selfs, because when Hank sings, "tears come down / like fallin' rain" I swear my chair starts to slide and tries to pull me into the ground.

Elpenor's Dream

The wine inside me is a coat flung over my head,
a tug on limbs as I crawl up to the thatched roof,
survey this ragged island–a toe protruding in bathwater–
this Aeaea, whose air assumes and evicts
the sea-salt brine coating my skin,

but even at this dry height, the ruined day now
drowned over the horizon and match-head stars
held between fingers, my body can't forget
the seesaw rhythm of breakers lunging at keel.

*

Everyone wanted to know what I saw:
a final prophetic coil of images before
the rousing mumbles of morning,
before a swift, empty catch of wind
and the ground's unforgiving snicker,
before the plea for burial, and before they found
the way home and forgot about me–

on my last night, I slept with the breeze
and the blackness on my face,
dreaming of nothing.

A small gift, to erase
the war, that twisted man and his boat,
but the gods punished my mutiny of the mind,
their laughter dripping from clouds
as I fell from the roof.

Nietzsche's Nature Walk

"[He] realized, with a shudder, that all this was not so alien to him after all, that his Apollonian consciousness was but a thin veil hiding from him the whole Dionysian realm." *–Birth of Tragedy*

A confused winter and a false spring
have left Alder Trail covered with ice.
Clinging to trembling aspens and lodge-pole pines,
we stumble to each interpretive sign, learning
how to spot the sunscreen powder on poplars
and the old man's beard that clings
to the chin of dead trees. The sphagnum moss
is spreading beneath our feet: an unassuming blanket
swallowing the forest floor.

After returning to the minimalist landscape
of my apartment, I pluck the yellowing leaves
from my manicured asparagus fern–
brittle boats now adrift in my palm.
Unlike my friend's plant, a shag head
that spits dead leaves on the floor,
my fern sits prim on the kitchen counter,
yet it cannot restrain the brash shoots
that leap from the soil and scream for light.

Kitchen: Table for Two

I'm the stone guest to a solitary meal–
invitado de piedra,
one who fills an empty chair,
staring down insistent questions
posed by my food

beyond the window, red sky
is blinded by shreds of snow
racing to hit ground and build
earth clouds, a reflection to be
crunched and shoveled by morning

*

these thoughts are evicted,
this private dinner recast
when your shoes drop at the door

now we're part of a small ceremony:
balanced table, feast of smiles,
two invited guests
who sit like children,
watching the evening

Underwood Manual

the tuneless piano machine volunteers
its many palms, waits for fingers
to poke the polished keytops–
portraits that hide soot-covered feet–
and incite the typebars to jab at ink ribbon,
kicking against strapped-in paper braced
like a punching bag

listen to the tempo of pummeling, but resist
the mind's ballooning as its untrained rabble
forms into strict horizons, lease roads plowed over snow

see the typewriter exhausted, your fingers
conceding to the keys, but ignore the page,
still blank in its carriage,
as you heave the typewriter, covered and mute,
over the balcony, listening for a resolving crash

find in the alley a growing puddle of language
seeping from the cold box, but be careful not
to drown in the swell, your lips overflowing
with other people's words

Sleeping, on Call, at the Misericordia Hospital

for Marsha

The call-room bed is tilted, lopsided:
you're sleeping at the edge of the roof,
or tied to a raft
held on the cusp of a wave.

At the edge of a roof,
what silence allowed there?
held on the cusp of a wave
partnered with sleep's unreasonable brother.

What the silence allowed:
your mind, all elbows and heels,
partnered with sleep's unreasonable brother
refusing you to dream.

Your mind all elbows and heels,
picking raspberries, hiking to Robertson glacier,
but refusing the dream of
sunwarmed fruitflesh filling your palm.

Raspberries, Robertson glacier–
but no, you're waking,
fruitflesh spilling from your palm,
a magpie singing next to you.

Waking,
tied to a raft
magpie singing next to you,
bed tilted, lopsided.

Afterword: Wreckage from the Lifeboat

"…a book of poems is a damned serious affair." – Wallace Stevens

It is a diffident business, often perilous, to explicate one's own work, for the poet is, at best, an untrustworthy authority on himself, and, at worst, a mischievous misleader of readers. Yet, perhaps the subjects and themes stowed in my poems (work, music, travel, art and dreams) deserve a brief individual explanation to show their importance and place within the whole.

•

Work: Tom Wayman posits that the job is the center of our civilization and our personal lives, and he is "convinced work will one day become and be considered a major subject in our literature" (32). Wayman has often argued in his writing that even though we spend most of our waking hours at a job, it is a subject often ignored by literature. While I do not share Wayman's belief that social changes could be inspired from a literature that focuses on daily work, I do consider the activities of work as a site of imaginative potential, filled with compelling narratives and images that are worth investigating. The aim of the poems in the first section is to find the arresting moments within the quotidian sphere of the workplace, and despite the sense of futility and entrapment that many of my work poems connote, a feeling of possibility is present in these small epiphanies, however transient they may be.

•

Music: Literature often looks to music as the transcendent art, for example in Jan Zwicky's poem "Practicing Bach," in which she reflects that in music, "these notes – there names / are stars." Perhaps there exists a writerly jealousy of the

aesthetic purity that music offers the listener, a deficiency expressed by Albert Mockel when he states that "strong as a great poet's voice may be, there are areas where his word does not reach…" (qtd. in Acquisto 2). However, music is not always perfection: it can be amateur, a ragged process of learning marred with failures, which nevertheless still offers brief moments of that same transcendence, if only in a smaller magnitude. The attention in my music poems is focused on the process and details of how music is created.

Writing about music also brings with it the inherent challenge of using language to articulate what is outside of language, to translate the untranslatable. Often, metaphor becomes the key to expressing this antinomy: using the literally illogical comparisons as a method for understanding the unattainable, or moving closer by moving further away. As Don McKay notes, metaphor is "the leap [that] always says (besides its fresh comparison) that language is not commensurate with the real, that leaps are necessary if we are to regain some sense of the world outside it" (400). My music poems attempt to wrestle with this problem of how to use language to understand music.

•

Travel: The tourist is of two kinds in these poems: the resident of a foreign country (England), perhaps capable of insight into place and location, yet always kept at the distance of the outsider; and the traveling tourist, flitting between new places with a constant wonder, vainly attempting to delve beneath the surface of things before moving on to the next attraction. A sense of ambivalence is always present in these roles, being both, as P.K. Page describes, the "terrible tourists

with their empty eyes / longing to be filled with monuments", and "Yet somehow beautiful" (122). The tourist in my poems is bewildered and lost more often than he is confident as he tries to contextualize and understand what surrounds him. The travel poems of Earle Birney (such as "A Walk in Kyoto" and "Cartagena de Indias") were influential for me in their construction, as the alienating foreign space (constantly de-familiarizing the speaker) often yields moments of connection and insight that are beyond language and cultural distance.

•

Art and Dreams: A different attention is found in these poems, not on the details of the everyday, but focused on the contemplation of the artist/artistic process and the dream state, imagined in both mythological/historical figures and ordinary people. Insight and imagination are sparked by the art and artists (both famous and amateur) and their process of creation ("The Glass Blowers" and "Tower of Gaudí), as well as by the freedom of the sleep state, where car engines become practicing tongues of musicians, and typewriters drown people with their store of language.

The poems of the final section are joined together more loosely in subject matter than the other sections, a shift to fragmentation signaled by the ghazal that begins the section. But as far removed from the everyday situations and processes of creation as they may seem, the last poem returns to the place of work (the hospital), which hints at a cyclical end to the collection similar to Engels' conception of the dialectical spiral: we have returned to the beginning, but everything has changed.

Final notes: In its classical tradition, the ghazal consists of discrete couplets which hold no overt connection to one another. What often brings some sense of unity to the ghazal, however, is the implicit mode of attention, or what Don McKay might call poetic attunement, of the speaker. This relationship between the elements of a ghazal is analogous to the different subjects explored within this collection, subjects which in many ways could not be more different from each other. What unites these poems is the poetic gaze behind them, the poetic attention focused on the quotidian and the ideas of process and creation, which seeks out brief moments of epiphany hidden in the particulars of the everyday. It is a gaze which sees the confluence of the personal, the historical, and the mythological intertwined in the details of language and the physical world.

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